



WOMEN@AMBIT



Women's Day is celebrated to acknowledge the achievements of women made over time and to create awareness amongst women to stand for themselves with an aim to bring in gender equality in every aspect of life.

That's the essence of having this one day in the year - and I will admit it has been a journey for me to keep my skepticism at bay about this day. When I dig into the cause of this cynicism, there are two main reasons. The simple one is a personal aversion to symbolism and being caught up in the fanfare to just tick a box, that's just not for me. At a slightly nuanced level it is also because I feel completely empowered and have been able to exercise my agency to believe in my abilities, make choices and then act upon them. I am reluctant to acknowledge any biases whether visible or unconscious, because not giving them any power has been my strategy over the years. And it works.

That out of the way, it's interesting and enjoyable to talk with women@work on how to navigate professional lives and meet our aspirations.

Any discussion around women in the workplace generally starts from the top i.e. how many women business leaders do we have, and whether there is adequate representation in the C suites. Playing the devil's advocate I'd ask **why should there be more women leaders** in the first place? Beyond the fair play and equality arguments, in a comprehensive study conducted by S&P Global a couple of years ago they found that firms with female CEOs and CFOs produced superior stock performance and that firms with higher gender diversity on their Boards were more profitable than firms with lower gender diversity. In her book **My Life in Full, Indra Nooyi**, makes a convincing argument on how improving the support (company and community) for women unleashes the economy's full potential. Effectively leveraging the potential of women, from a human resource perspective is value additive. Think of it in line with the new-age tech businesses being built around monetizing existing resources by finding efficient ways to utilize them, you don't split the pie you increase the pie.

There are more women now than before in senior leadership positions, and a lot of inspiring women leaders who have broken the glass ceiling, and the good news is that the trend line is positive, despite the fact that women are still significantly underrepresented in leadership. A study conducted by McKinsey of women in Corporate America shows that in 2021 women at entry level were about 48% of the workforce and about 22% at the senior leadership level.

The ladies vanish. Why do we fall off dramatically in the higher ranks of organizations? Research suggests the key reason is the 'broken rung' at the first step to be a manager. In just the first step the number of women that get promoted reduces significantly, which means there are fewer women to promote to higher levels. Why does that happen? I'm no expert on this subject but would guess it's a function of primarily two things. The first is work life balance, especially for young family builders. There are pulls from different sides and without proper support from family and the company, many women opt out quite early. Speaking from the experience of many talented friends and colleagues who opted out early, 12-15 years later when their personal commitments were reduced and they got a minute, they seem to have a wistfulness, and many times (after a glass of wine) even regret that they gave up something that was so meaningful to them. If you are in that phase of your life, take my advice – don't give up. Just hang in there, lean-in and ask for all the support you can. It will be worth it.

Research also suggests that a lot of women opt out because of workplace problems, inability to cope with expectations, demands and long hours. They can't manage the ecosystem effectively and just find it not worth their while to stay when things get tough. This one is relatively easier to solve for and we can do many things as an organization as well as colleagues to create that network of support. There is a need to reverse the stereotype that women don't support other women, and if there is one **#breakthebias** for me it is this one. Years of prime time soap operas have blown out of proportion the stereotype, many times to the amusement and entertainment of other colleagues that women don't get on with each other, and I want to call it outit's complete %&\$##### . And if there are any of us who do not agree, on a lighter note let me remind you of what Madeline Albright famously said "There is a special place in hell for women who do not help other women".

Recent research in Harvard Business Review finds that while both men and women benefit from having a network of well-connected peers, women who also have an inner circle of close women connects are more likely to be successful, while there was no link found for men in terms of the gender composition of their inner circles. This suggests that building circles of trust and having each other's backs while sharing experiences, is effectively acting as mentors and sponsors for one another. And let's just be honest, this girl club sounds like the most fun idea in a long time.

I'm an advocate of gender neutrality @ the workplace, a gender equal world where your gender is incidental and you are valued for your work and your ideas. I believe we have that and we can collectively continue to build it and strengthen it.

And while I am gender agnostic at work, would I ever want to be born anything but a woman - Hell No! Never.



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